

“Come and See”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Life-Giving Water: The Good News. It comes to us from unexpected places. I was at a wonderful conference this past week or so, just outside of Louisville, Kentucky. I had driven through Louisville once, but I had never been there for any length of time. But, Ken told me it was a decent place - he went to Seminary there - and he wasn't lying. It was wonderful.

The conference guided my ministry and renewed it. It helped me to understand what we are to do next as a congregation, in the weeks, months and years to come. I will give you a little bit of feedback in a few minutes, but I want to look back at how I got home, because it was not an easy trip home.

See, I was supposed to fly home on Monday - that is when a little bit of snow hit Des Moines, but everything hit Chicago. And, when you are flying through O'Hare, it's very unusual to have O'Hare shut down, but that is what happened. So, I go up to the counter and I see there is this rustling and bustling of people. I'm about last in line, and I wait until I get to the counter. The woman [airline employee] is looking flustered, because everybody had been yelling at this poor woman. I mean, you would have thought that this woman controlled American Airlines. [Laughter] It was *her* fault that the snow hit the ground in Chicago. So, by the time I got to her, yelling was [pointless] - why bother? So, I just talked nice - and lo and behold, even though the flight was cancelled, she was able to find me another flight the next morning.

So, I called up the denomination, and said, "I was told that if we were stuck, I could get a hotel room." They found me a hotel room - which was a gift in and of itself - because everybody was trying to get one. So I got into a taxi, got to the hotel, slept a few hours and was back at the airport Tuesday morning - where I had spent all day Monday - at 5:45 a.m., because it was a 7-something a.m. flight, so I needed to be there 1½ hours early.

I sit there and am ready to go. The flight was cancelled again [laughter] - this time New York was getting hit. The whole northeast was hit - nothing seemed to be moving, I really couldn't complain because there were other people that were at the same conference I was at that were from New York, New Jersey and all over, so I figured, "Hey, it's moving west to east, so I'm going to get home before they do." So, again, I really couldn't complain too much.

So I wait in line with everyone else from the flight that was cancelled, and I got up to the desk, and sure enough it was the same woman [from yesterday]. And, when I got to her I didn't say a word. She said, "Oh, it's you again." [Laughter] I asked, "How did you remember me, with all of these people?" She said, "You are the one with the 'z' in your name." [Laughter]

Then, she also said, "But, I also remember you were one of the few people who didn't yell at me yesterday. You were even nice." I said, "Yes, I didn't really feel like it [being nice], but I guess I was." She said, "I'm going to do you a favor." I said, "Ok, fine." So, she got

me on a flight to Charlotte. [Laughter] I trusted her, and she said, "It's one of the only places that is flying right now. I mean Atlanta is so wiped out, because everybody is trying to get to Atlanta and there is nothing moving. But, I can get you to Charlotte and then there is a flight that is leaving - I think it's the only one that has a seat, and it is a direct flight to Des Moines." I said, "Great." She said, "The only problem is, it's booking five minutes before you land, but I'm going to see, and if you make it - great. If not, it might be another night, but you might as well be stuck in Charlotte as Louisville." [Laughter]

So I got on the plane and I had to smile because, [at least] I'm on "something," and the thing was - she was so sweet. She put me in the first seat behind first class, which is extra-long, and my legs could stretch out. I thought, "Oh, It paid to be nice once in my life." [Laughter]

So we flew in [to Charlotte] and I was a nervous wreck. We got there and I was able to make the adjoining flight, and it was great. I realized, in that moment, that that woman had the potential of making my life miserable or joyous; and, in that moment where I was at the well, begging for a flight, she was there. Because I had a lot going on Wednesday morning that I just could not miss. I was giving the prayer at the Capitol at 8:15 a.m., and I wasn't going to make it except for that woman, and I was so grateful. I don't know her name, but she will always remember mine. [Laughter] It was a wonderful blessing.

I was thinking about this because Jesus, when he went to the well, was just hot, tired and thirsty; and the woman went to the well feeling the same way. It said in the commentary that I read, that the only people who would draw water at noon, would be the women who were shunned by all of the other women. [Most] Women would go to the well in the early morning, or in late evening, when it was cooler in the desert.

But any person who was there - especially a woman, because they are the ones that drew the water at that day and age - but anyone who was there at noon was [there] because she was not appropriate to be around the other women - whatever it was that she might have done, or [was] perceived to have done. So when Jesus was there beside her, that was bad enough, because men and women shouldn't be seen together alone. [It was] horrible that it was a Jew and a Samaritan, and that this woman was there at noon. There were all sorts of problems with this woman anyway, and Jesus asked her for water. So her question was not inappropriate: "Why are you asking me - a Samaritan women - for water and you are a Jewish man?"

Neither one of them shied away. She should have been shy and hidden. She wasn't. She stood up for herself and communicated back to him, and he wasn't put off. You know, he could have been thinking to himself, "Oh, my gosh, what am I thinking? I'm so thirsty and tired, and I spoke to this woman, and I shouldn't have done it. I put her at risk and I put myself at risk."

Jesus didn't care. It was more important to be in a relationship with her in that moment. They started a conversation and they gave each other something. She gave him the water, and he gave her hope in a life better than the one she had, where no one would speak to her - where she was shunned - where she was somehow inappropriate, and yet he saw her as appropriate, worth talking to, worth the water of life that he gave her that day. He made her

worthy through his care, his time and his compassion, and it happened in an ordinary circumstance of life.

We come here on Sunday mornings, we hear the beautiful organ, the amazing choir, this gorgeous facility and we think this is where the Spirit of God must be. But, as you read the Bible, most of the time (well, maybe I shouldn't talk about this, I need people in the pews on Sunday morning) [laughter], but most of the time [when] this stuff happens - this stuff being relationships and the power of the Holy Spirit at work - it doesn't happen in the Synagogue. It didn't happen in the Temple. It happened around a well, around getting water to drink. It happened around the mundane activities of life. If you were open to experiencing the Holy Spirit in a moment you were not prepared for, you could receive the Holy Spirit. The Samaritan woman received it just gathering water. I received it that day, from that beautiful gift that woman gave me of leg room and the chance to get home. She had the power and she freely gave it to me that day, and I made it home to fulfill my commitments and to get home to my wife.

You will find the Holy Spirit, if you are listening, in the moments that are the most difficult and the most frustrating; if you are willing to stop long enough to listen, and to relax, and to let the Spirit guide you - and it isn't just me.

You think Republicans and Democrats are at odds - Jews and Samaritans were 10 times worse. Jesus brought them together, in the example of that woman who ran back to her people and told them about this Jewish man who gave her water that would last a lifetime, and eternally. The Samaritans began to hear the message of life: the good news from Jesus.

We have that opportunity. I received the water of life in these colleagues and friends that I worked with at the conference I was at. We had ministers from Alaska, Florida, to Maine, to California and Arizona, and everywhere in between. It was so interesting to hear them talk. We talked about each other's churches, and what we are doing, and our goals, and dreams, and hopes.

They were so impressed with what we were doing here at Westminster, and the things we wanted to accomplish in the coming years, and I realized that we are doing God's work in a worthy manner.

I read a quote in a book I was reading, that they recommended at the conference, and it was by one of my favorite theologians, Douglas John Hall. He wrote a book called "Waiting for Gospel." He said the church has lost the conviction of the Gospel as being truly good news and thus, is offering something watered-down and ineffective. That isn't us. We are relevant in the work that we are doing, whether it is caring for children, helping the homeless downstairs - whether it is reaching out to immigrants and refugees.

We have had a number of refugee families coming in, trying to figure out how to get their green cards renewed. Lisa has been responding to them - as I shared last week - and they are trying to figure out how to pay for it [their green card] and whether they are getting food stamps - which means they don't have to pay for the green card. But, if they aren't getting food stamps, they have to pay \$600 a piece to renew it [their green card]. It is so confusing that we can't figure it out. English is our first language and we are residents here. How hard is it for them, and we are making it happen.

All of the ways we are helping makes us relevant, brings the Gospel alive, and brings the water of life back into our congregation. So I say, "Come and see. See what we are doing. Invite others to come and see what the Christian church is doing. I was awed by what all of the different churches around this country are doing, reaching out in God's name. We are not alone; but we are one of the leaders doing so very much, and I pray that whether Republican or Democrat, woman or man, gay or straight, old or young, whatever our race or religion, that we will be able to work together, put aside our differences and reach out; be nice and watch how the Holy Spirit works. In Jesus name we do pray. Amen